Enchanted storytelling: Muḥammad Khuḍayyir between Borges and Shahrazad

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> [The collector of tales] whispered: 'Wipe out the void, drink in the silence and breathe as deeply as you can. Then close your eyes and let things settle in the furrow of your memory. Examine them as if you're seeing them for the first time. Scatter them and let them doze and don't interrogate them. They'll grow and flower and spread their perfume and pour out their words. The tale will come to you and open like a mute flower. Spread your hands to catch the falling leaves shining in the dawn light. The crimson letters will slash your flesh and reach your heart and mind like an antidote for your sorrows and sleepless nights.'
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> Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, p. 80

During the course of the twentieth century folk literature and especially the collection of *Alf Layla wa-layla*, the *Thousand and One Nights* (henceforth, the *Nights*), have played a pivotal role in inspiring Arab writers to experiment with new forms of fiction. This was not always the case as Arab critics and writers had traditionally considered the collection of tales to be outside the canon of serious literature (see for instance Musawi 2003: 71–73 and Rastegar 2007: 55–65). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the conversation between Arab writers and their literary heritage, *al-turāth*, has been fruitful, but initially forms of popular storytelling were not considered to be serious sources of inspiration. In Egypt, for example, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945–2015) and Idwār al-Kharrāṭ (1926–2015) wrote highly original novels through their re-reading of classical texts such as historical chronicles and mystical poetry. During the course of the twentieth century and subsequently, numerous Arab writers have drawn on the *Nights* for inspiration, including notably Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and later Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, Najīb Maḥfūẓ and Ḥanān al-Shaykh. The *Nights*, especially its frame story, has also inspired feminist re-readings by Arab women writers such as Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī.

The earlier European engagement with the *Nights* from the eighteenth century onwards is well documented. More recently, in Robert Irwin's words, 'the *Nights* has become a sourcebook for [European] modernist fiction in its playful mode' (Irwin 1994: 278). The early short stories of Muḥammad Khuḍayyir (born in Basra in 1942), one of the most original Iraqi writers to have emerged in the late 1960s, have been praised as a fresh departure within the modern history of Iraqi and Arabic fiction as they merged what is real (*wāqiʿī*) with what is magic (*siḥrī*) in the life of ordinary people (al-ʿĀnī 1999: 103). In this article, through a close textual analysis of three key short stories, we will discuss how the dialogue Khuḍayyir has established with traditional storytelling and the *Nights* has developed in unexpected ways. Thanks to his fruitful interaction with a traditional form of storytelling, Khuḍayyir has become the author of original modern *ʿajā'ib* tales (tales of the fantastic), and also a theoriser and a promulgator of this new kind of Arabic fiction.

1. Shahrazad vs Umm ʿAbbās: Do you think this is funny?

Muḥammad Khuḍayyir's short story 'Ḥikāyat al-mawqid' ('A Fireside Tale') represents the first intriguingly ambivalent stage in the writer's relationship with a type of traditional storytelling that finds its best-known expression in Arabic in the collection of the *Nights*.

'Ḥikāyat' opens the second part of Khuḍayyir's first collection of short stories, *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'* ('The Black Kingdom'), published in 1972 in Baghdad. The second part of the collection includes stories that deal with war, albeit in an indirect, oblique way. As is the case in most stories of the collection, at the core of 'Ḥikāyat' is a void, an absence and an unresolved condition of waiting. The husband/father figure in a poor, provincial household is a soldier, who has left his family to fight in a war that remains unspecified in the story. The absent man's young wife, their two children, the woman's mother-in-law and an elderly neighbour (Umm ʿAbbās, the story's only named character) are eagerly anticipating his return, their life stuck in a condition of seemingly perpetual waiting. The soldier (the husband/father character), who, in a more

conventional story could have played the traditional role of a male hero, is a mere shadowy presence in this story. In fact, he is often referred to as 'the man in the picture' (*rajul al-ṣūra*) because a photograph that depicts him in uniform is hung on one of the walls of the bare room that constitutes the family's home. The photograph is a sort of cage within which the young man's 'shadow' (*ẓill*) is imprisoned, and from which he intermittently appears to participate in the action, although he is ignored by the people who gather in the evening around the fire to listen to Umm ʿAbbās's tale.

The story plays on the interaction between, on one hand, the main narrative of the frame story, its modernist structure and style (which we will discuss below), and its author's implied social criticism, and, on the other hand, the folktale that Umm ʿAbbās narrates to the members of the family. The story within the story structure, the fact that we are reading a story of people who are listening to a folktale, and the very nature of the tale itself, are all elements that are immediately reminiscent of the *Nights*. The folktale narrated by the old neighbour is similar in style and content to one of the simpler tales from the *Nights*, but also to folktales in general. The tale tells the story of the Sultan's beautiful daughter who, having fallen mysteriously ill, is healed by a beggar, thanks to the magic powers of his rooster. The beggar, who turns out to be a prince in disguise, is given the princess's hand and becomes the new Sultan. However, one day the new Sultan decides to go back to his homeland. He leaves his magic bird behind, telling his wife that 'his life is dependent on [it]' (Khuḍayyir 2005: 107), so as she watches it gradually lose all its wonderful, multi-coloured feathers, each one a different colour from the other, she understands that her husband will never come back to her.

The connection to Shahrazad's perpetual nocturnal narration is established from the very beginning. Khuḍayyir's story begins with an extremely short sentence followed by a two-word phrase: *Li-kull masāʾ ḥikāya. Ḥikāya wāḥida.* 'To every evening, a tale. One tale [only]' (99). However, these few words are then followed by a very long sentence, which is full of parenthetical clauses and asides; a style that is typical of the rest of the story. This style allows

the author to add information on the characters and setting but also gives his narrator free rein to express some seemingly impromptu comments on what is happening in the poor household on this particular evening and on Umm ʿAbbās's story. In the following passage we can see how Umm ʿAbbās's narration, addressed to the children, is interrupted by the main narrator, whose words are in brackets in the original:

> Once upon a time (You wicked turtles! Who can recall that buried day, that precious day? The young mother goes deeper down the pathways of the embers in the fireplace and melts, melts away as she waits. What can a sandgrouse be waiting for?). My little ones, the Sultan had only one daughter and—praise be to the Creator!—she would say to the moon: 'Leave the sky, so I can take your place.' Her hair reached down to her heels, her face was like a mirror, her eyes were like a gazelle's, her teeth... (The darkness grew silent. Only the dogs' fitful barking continued to ask the stars for their blessing, as the light of the lamp witnessed the crime [*al-ithm*], and the shepherd's soul bobbed in the kettle). (105)[1]

We propose to look at the frame story's narrator as a typically *modernist* narrator whose narration contrasts starkly with Umm ʿAbbās's traditional Shahrazadesque storytelling. The imagery used by Umm ʿAbbās sometimes relies on hyperbole but is always conventional. For

[1] It is clear that Umm ʿAbbas's storytelling is part of the simple way of life led by the family. The space they inhabit is quintessentially provincial, a country town, their house next to a train station somewhere between Baghdad and Basra. Their house is one room, at the centre of which lies a fireplace. This provincial world is dominated by traditional beliefs and superstitions and it is not incidental that Umm ʿAbbās was born when Iraq was part of the Ottoman empire (Khuḍayyir 2005: 99). The shepherd's bobbing soul in the kettle refers to a story told by the old grandmother about a bewitched shepherd whose fiddle used to play wonderful, painful melodies every night. When he died, a blacksmith designed a kettle in the shape of the fiddle, which since the death of its owner kept on playing those melodies every time 'the water in it boiled, reaching the same temperature as the bewitched shepherd's heart' (101). This traditional world is also a natural world where plants and animals coexist with she-demons and jinn, and the sultans and princesses of folktales. The members of the family and their old neighbour are merged into this natural world as they are compared to animals and vegetables in a way that can be strangely evocative (for example, the young wife is described as being on the alert like 'a black Bedouin bitch', 103; and the grandmother who spends all her time in bed lies there 'like a cucumber', 100).

example, the Sultan's daughter is so beautiful that she thinks she can take the place of the moon—a traditional paradigm of beauty—which recurs in the *Nights*.[2] Similarly, like the protagonists of the *Nights*, Umm ʿAbbās refers to the Almighty in a conventional way, and is neutral towards the characters of her tale. Conversely, the main narrator's tone is often sarcastic. He[3] is clearly impatient with Umm ʿAbbās's clichés and is eager to interrupt her, either to take us back to some key episodes in the life of the young wife and her husband (their wedding; the day he left), or to give us poetic descriptions of the setting or insights into the young wife's consciousness. His imagery is unorthodox and ambiguous, often obscure: we will only gradually understand what the young woman's melting into the embers and 'the crime', mentioned in the passage quoted above, might stand for, while we may have to look elsewhere in order to grasp the full implications of his referring to 'the wicked turtles' (*al-salāḥif al-khabītha*) and the 'sandgrouse' (*al-qaṭāt*).[4] While the linear, unadorned style of Umm ʿAbbās's tale faithfully mirrors the famous stylistic plainness of the *Nights*, the narrator's style is richly evocative and poetic.[5]

Even if Umm ʿAbbās's tale can be seen as similar to a short tale from the *Nights*, she emerges as a second-rate Shahrazad. The young wife bitterly (*bi-marāra*) tells Umm ʿAbbās to go ahead and re-tell one of her tales after the latter confesses to the eager children that she has no new tale to tell (104). At the end of 'Ḥikāyat', it is clear that the tales narrated by the old neighbour are not even a meagre consolation for the young wife who realises that, yet again, the

[2] See for example Lyons 2010: 51, 115, 129, 145.
[3] It is debatable whether the narrator can be seen as possessing a typically male voice, but we have tentatively assumed this in order to clearly distinguish this voice from Umm 'Abbās's female voice.
[4] In another highly significant short story in Khuḍayyir's development, 'Ruʾyā kharif' ('An Autumn Vision', dated September 1983), the character of 'the turtle grandmother', a midwife, occupies a prominent part in the narrator's vision (the story, included in the 1995 collection *Ruʾyā kharīf*, has been translated into English by Shakir Mustafa as 'The Turtle Grandmother'). Perhaps the turtle in Khuḍayyir's imagination stands for a quintessential old woman, whereas the small sandgrouse, which is clearly associated with the young woman, could stand for a young, vulnerable woman. The smallness of this desert bird is mentioned in a Prophetic *ḥadīth* that states that whoever builds a mosque, even if it is smaller than a sandgrouse's nest, will be rewarded in paradise.
[5] Many translators of the *Nights* have commented on the linearity of the style of most of its tales. Whereas some of Borges's statements in his often quoted 'The Translators of the *Thousand and One Nights*' have recently been considered either old-fashioned (Fudge 2016: 135, 145–146) or Orientalist *avant la lettre* (Kennedy 2013: 214 n. 6), his comments on the 'stylistic poverty' of the *Nights* have been echoed by most critics (see for example Fudge 2016: 139).

trains that stop at the station close to her house have failed to bring back her husband.[6] In fact, seen through the disillusioned eyes of the forsaken young wife, Umm ʿAbbās's storytelling is a bitter and poisonous ritual (*ṭaqs ḥanẓalī*), the end of which she welcomes, at least for this evening (112).[7] This is in stark contrast to the exhilarating, vertiginous feeling that Shahrazad's stories within stories can produce, and it also differs greatly from the main function of the tales Shahrazad narrates. The latter's continuing narration means the prolongation of her life and the gradual transformation of Shahryar's worldview. In Khuḍayyir's story, the storytelling seems to prolong the young wife's solitude and torment, and is like a curse: you have to listen to a tale every evening until your man comes back home (113). This makes fun of the concept of 'the ransom tale', which is so central to the *Nights* as it famously informs its frame story and numerous other tales narrated by Shahrazad and her sub-narrators: your life can be spared if your would-be executioner is told a marvellous, astonishing tale.

In 'Ḥikāyat', Umm ʿAbbās's folktale even fails to give the heroine the solace that similar folktales give the female protagonists of certain Iraqi novels. Elsewhere, we have observed how folktales are part of the characterisation of some female characters in Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān's ground-breaking first novel *al-Nakhla wa-l-jīrān* ('The Palm Tree and the Neighbours', 1966).

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[6] As in another story included in the second part of *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, 'al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyya' ('Night Trains'), trains and their noise are depicted as overwhelming cosmic phenomena. Umm ʿAbbās's narration is inevitably suspended every time a train is heard approaching the station nearby:

> The train had a devilish sound, unearthly, echoing in the vessel of the night like stars being torn from the sky, as it rapidly approached the station in the desert [*al-maḥaṭṭa al-ramliyya*] like a mythical beast with iron feet. (Khuḍayyir 2005: 101)

The train, the quintessential symbol of modernity in a traditional provincial reality, fails to connect the family's space to the modernity of the urban centres. More importantly, it fails to bring 'the man in the picture' back to his expectant family. In this way, the potentially life-giving machine remains a monstrous creature which can only unsettle the natural order of the family's traditional space, where folk tales and nature coexist:

> As it penetrated the virginal hymens of the night, the train woke up the plants slumbering beyond the railway (and so, that terrifying croaking sound that the individuals gathered around the fire heard every evening was nothing but the scream of the roots woken up by the screeching of the train's heavy wheels). (Ibid.)

[7] In his 'Bayt min laḥm' (1971; 'House of Flesh', 1978), Yūsuf Idrīs describes the bitterness of women waiting in vain for a man with reference to the same plant (colocynth) by a different name, *ʿalqam* (Idrīs 1971: 11).

These tales resonate with Tumāḍir, the young protagonist of *Nakhla*, who in a moment of great personal distress can relate to them, indeed, can find in them 'a source of entertainment and dreams' (Caiani and Cobham 2013: 99). Female imagination in the same novel, which is translated into a folktale, gives another character the ability to conjure up an alternative, better reality that transcends the pitifully poor space she, along with the other characters of the novel, inhabits (97–98). Another innovative Iraqi novelist, Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr, clearly relied on the structure of the *Nights* and the use of fantastic folktales in his novel *Imraʾat al-ghāʿib* ('The Missing Person's Wife', 2004). In this novel, characters try to come to terms with the trauma of war (the novel refers to the Iran-Iraq war) by exploiting the potentially therapeutic power of folktales, which are also used to refer in an indirect way to the internal tragedy of life under a despotic regime. Like Khuḍayyir in 'Ḥikāyat', however, al-Ṣaqr also implies a criticism of storytelling being used as a panacea (Caiani and Cobham 2013: 183–8).

In 'Ḥikāyat', Khuḍayyir does not turn Umm ʿAbbās's folktale into a source of comfort or therapeutic value for the young wife. Yet, as happens often in the *Nights*, in 'Ḥikāyat' too the framed tale mirrors the framing tale. We understand that the destiny of the two male characters is the same. As the new Sultan, the owner of the marvellous rooster, is kept away from his beautiful young wife for 'long days' (Khuḍayyir 2005: 110), so the framing story's young wife is kept apart from her soldier husband. When the folktale comes to its sad end and we are about to hear Umm ʿAbbās say that the Sultan is dead, yet another train stops at the station nearby and interrupts her narration. Another moment of silence ensues, followed by a moment of collective, concentrated focus experienced by those gathered around the fire, but their expectation is again left unfulfilled and this last train fails to bring the missing man back home. Before they realise this, we are given a powerful and erotic representation of the feelings that the young wife experiences as her hopes are stirred (again, the brackets are in the original):

> After the train stopped in the station came the sluggish, wearisome moments of waiting [*daqā'iq al-intiẓār al-muzayyat al-shāqqa*] (the young mother believes that the narrow road that stretches between the needle-like grass [*al-ʿushb al-ibarī*] from the station to the house is furnished with bells that will ring a warning if someone walks on it). She imagined that the bells were ringing now and wished she could say: 'He's come', but she couldn't because the women had grown used to keeping silent during this ritual. She imagined him approaching as the bells rang out: here he is, walking down the road. Time will go backwards as he approaches, time that belongs to a world without air. First, his smell will come, then the sound of his heavy trousers flapping against his heels, then the colour of him streaming through the cracks in the door – he will arrive in the blink of an eye, in a sigh of yearning, a whisper of desire, now, now, now, now now now... (a million times now). (112)

The psychological portrayal of the characters is completely absent from Umm ʿAbbās's folktale (as it is from the *Nights*), whereas the complex interior life of the young wife is at the very heart of the narrator's frame story. It is therefore not surprising that the Iraqi critic ʿĀ'id Khuṣbāk states in his study of the Iraqi fiction of the 1960s that the stories included in *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'* are the best examples of what he calls *ḥikāyāt al-mawqif*, stories that focus on a situation, a state of mind, a certain condition, rather than on an action, an event (*ḥikāyāt al-ḥadath*) (Khuṣbāk 2014: 103). This is in contrast to the *Nights* where 'motivation is directly wedded to action [...] [and] personality is defined by action' (Irwin 1994: 226). 'Ḥikāyat al-mawqid' focuses firmly on the plight of the young wife, the fear of becoming barren that invades her consciousness and the lack of sexual and wider sensual fulfilment that a young woman without a husband has to face in this traditional social environment.[8] All the same, we are not

[8] For a few other memorable depictions of women without men in traditional Arab society, see the above-mentioned 'Bayt min laḥm' (1971; 'House of Flesh', 1978) by Yūsuf Idrīs, ʿAbd al-Malik Nūrī's 'Faṭṭūma' (1948; see Caiani and Cobham 2013: 30-3 for a brief discussion of the place of this text in the history of modern Iraqi literature), Farmān's portrayal of Salīma in *al-Nakhla wa-'l-jīrān* (1966; for a detailed

dealing here with fiction that offers a direct form of social criticism. The plight of the woman is evoked discreetly at first and then in an increasingly powerful way, through rich and bold imagery, where her thoughts are made to interact with Umm ʿAbbās's folktale and the dying embers in the fire.[9] The metaphor of the young woman melting away in the embers of the fireplace is sustained throughout the story and symbolises her disintegration as she is worn down by the constant waiting. The final depiction of her melting away in the frame story is interspersed with the rooster losing its feathers in the framed story.

It is important to stress that Khuḍayyir makes the modernist narrator his narrator-in-chief who never relinquishes his control on the story as a whole. This is different from what happens in the *Nights* where Shahrazad is so respectful of her sub-narrators that she disappears from the narrative and we almost forget about her when we lose ourselves in the *mise en abyme* structure of her narrative edifice. In 'Ḥikāyat', the main narrator exercises his control quite explicitly and, as we have seen, at times sarcastically and mischievously. The readers of 'Ḥikāyat' are sometimes addressed directly by the main narrator, whose disruptive voice is an original narrative device within Khuḍayyir's early fiction. The Iraqi critic Shujāʿ Muslim al-ʿĀnī was one of the first to recognise Khuḍayyir's achievements in the stories collected in *al-Mamlaka al-sawdā'*, and a great admirer of 'Ḥikāyat' (which he considers to be 'one of [Khuḍayyir's] best stories about war', al-ʿĀnī 1999: 96). For al-ʿĀnī the narrator's voice is 'loud', 'boisterous' (*ṣākhib*), and the way he addresses us directly fulfils the distancing role of Brechtian theatre (119) that invites the audience to adopt a more consciously critical role vis-à-vis the

discussion of the novel see Caiani and Cobham 2013: 73–114). In the short story 'Qūt al-qulūb' (1994), Ḥanān al-Shaykh writes about women without men in a more positive and humorous way (the name of the protagonist and aspects of the story can be read as allusions to the *Nights*).

[9] Such is the frame story's stylistic richness that when the young wife understands her husband will not come back to her on this particular evening, the narrative style becomes graphic and haunting. She looks at the people who are with her by the fire, their faces effaced by shadows in the partial darkness of the room and

> she saw them all wearing sheepskins, looking at her with buffalo's eyes (she saw the buffalo going down to the river and the sheep being skinned in the courtyards of saints' shrines and the houses of the rich. She saw what stomachs and bowels contain, she saw brains and bone marrow, and the look in the eye of a slaughtered animal, saw the mucus flowing and the blood soaking the earth: she saw deception and the knife blade). (Khuḍayyir 2005: 112–13)

play (the opposite of folktales that demand that we lose ourselves in them). The fact that his voice is at times tainted by a haughty and cynical tone makes us ambivalent and potentially unsympathetic towards him. In other words, we do not quite know how to react to his invitations to laugh at Umm ʿAbbās's expense: 'Who feels like laughing? Have a look at the old woman as she writhes through the words of her tale as if she's swallowed two kilos of nails before coming here' (Khuḍayyir 2005: 105). We might smile at these inventive disparaging remarks, but we also have in mind the sympathetic and poignant passages focusing on the young wife, which make the atmosphere of the story more sombre. We might even instinctively sympathise with Umm ʿAbbās and reject the narrator's sarcasm. By the time we reach the final anti-climax of the story (the soldier's failure to materialise), the narrator is bitter and even angry with himself and us for being mere observers of the young woman's plight—perhaps a voyeuristic attitude is here unmasked and stigmatised.[10] At the very end of the story, we read of the sad way in which the characters exit the stage: the children quietly join their grandmother on their communal bed, Umm ʿAbbās does not even finish her tale nor say goodbye, as she knows her farewell greeting is never acknowledged. Nobody offers any sympathy to the forlorn young wife, 'the shackled woman' (113). The narrator provocatively asks us: 'Do you want to protest? Do you want to poke fun? Do you want to wait until tomorrow evening and listen to another tale by the fireside?' (ibid.), so undermining the notion that storytelling is entertaining, even life-enhancing.

What we have in 'Ḥikāyat' is a short text in which Khuḍayyir can be seen to carry out a 'creative destruction' of an ancient narrative paradigm, or at least a critical re-configuration and

[10] This self-criticism is echoed in a tongue-in-cheek manner when the narrator tells us about the young wife's visits to the local market with Umm ʿAbbās on Fridays. She feels attracted to the strangers selling their livestock there, those traditionally dressed men she sees as 'strong and desirable', proper men who smoke and always have things to talk about, like their houses, their wives and their children, and never turn to look at her. 'Those who do turn to look at her are elegant men who look civilised in the way they dress, they're employees or teachers, very bad people, their eyes as black as their hearts, who come to the market only to look [at women]' (Khuḍayyir 2005: 107). It is quite possible that Khuḍayyir, who in the 1960s worked as a young teacher in rural areas, is casting an ironic glance at himself here.

use of an ancient form within a sceptical, modernist narrative context.[11] It is as if a confident young Khuḍayyir at the beginning of his literary career is eager to show how eclectically creative he can be in only a few pages. In these pages we can find, in a highly condensed form, poetic realism, social realism, metafictional pastiche, fantastic literature,[12] war literature, self-directed irony, jokes, folklore. It is also true that at this early stage in his life as a writer, Khuḍayyir casts a sceptical glance at the power and status of a traditional form of storytelling vis-à-vis a technically adventurous yet socially aware kind of fiction. His rapport with Shahrazad will change gradually but very significantly in the ensuing decades.

2. Death and the Painter: An Ottoman Dream.

In 'Ḥikāyat', Khuḍayyir writes a dense and rich narrative within which traditional storytelling and the uncanny are parts of a composite portrayal of a young woman's marginalised reality. In 'Iḥtiḍār rassām' ('Death of a Painter'; written in 1977, published in 1978), the writer gives further expression to his fascination with the fantastical and the uncanny through a vivid representation of an artist's imagination and by an original depiction of death. Even though a conversation with the *Nights* is less explicit in this later text than it is in 'Ḥikāyat', we will show how a comparison between some elements of this story and some features of the collection can yield fruitful critical insights that will help us characterise further the development of Khuḍayyir's fiction vis-à-vis traditional storytelling. Largely ignored by

[11] Here we are using Frederic Jameson's characterisation of the genre of the novel generally, and of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* more specifically. Jameson borrows the phrase 'creative destruction' from Joseph Schumpeter's description of capitalism (Jameson 2017: 21).

[12] The uncanny element in the story is provided by the strikingly allusive passages that focus on the shadow captured in the photograph of the missing man, the cage of his restless soul. Thanks to these strange passages we are led to understand that the soldier/husband has indeed died. The shadow in his photograph is initially said to be burnt, waiting, dried up, about to scream, the soldier depicted in it is said to be hanging by a hair: 'who knows when the hair will break and this hidden life will come to an end?' (Khuḍayyir 2005: 104-5). Then, we read that the mouth of the man under the glass of the framed photograph is stained by traces of food or drink: the narrator wonders whether the man in the picture is taking part in secret banquets brought to life by 'the souls of people meeting illicitly, the souls of rubbish collectors, the souls of all those strangers' (108). Finally, when the last train stops and Umm ʿAbbas's tale reaches its end, the photograph shakes, its captive shadow sways, getting ready to slide out of its frame (111).

critics, this unusual story foreshadows some of the inclinations that will be part of Khuḍayyir's new writing (based on the fantastic element of storytelling), and it also represents an early compelling fictional representation of his later theoretical discussion on the short story genre.

'Iḥtiḍār' is included in Khuḍayyir's second short story collection, *Fī darajat khamsa wa-arbaʿīn miʾawī* ('At 45 Degrees Centigrade', 1978), which is remarkable for the eclectic nature of its texts in both their form and subject matter. In 'Iḥtiḍār', we also admire how the writer gives shape to his fascination with the Iraq of the Ottoman period.

The story's protagonist is Maḥmūd Effendi, an old painter who taught himself how to paint while a prisoner of the British in India during the First World War. The first part of the story gives examples of how the painter, back in Baghdad after the war, uses his imagination to create his paintings. The second part of the story focuses on the final moments of the painter's life, now that he has acquired, 'in his dusty *sidāra* and dirty clothes', the pitiful nature of one of those 'extinct creatures who appear in our world quite unexpectedly' (Khuḍayyir 2006: 84),[13] as we are told by the narrator, whose voice is less prominent than the voice of the narrator in 'Ḥikāyat'.

It is clear that Khuḍayyir here draws a parallel between his craft as the author of literary texts and the painter who wants to chronicle with his paintings the history of Baghdad. Maḥmūd's painting is the fruit of the interaction between his personal experience[14] and his readings (of travelogues and memoirs by historians and governors), on the one hand, and his vivid imagination on the other. We can see in what we read about Maḥmūd's portraits a commentary on Khuḍayyir's own fiction, especially in light of his future critical and fictional writings and, more immediately, of the second part of this story.

[13] Whereas we know that Maḥmūd was captured by the British during the First World War, we are not told much about the present time of the narration. At the end of the story, we read that the death of the painter is reported in a newspaper article entitled 'Death of the last painter of 'Abd al-Qādir Rassām's generation' (Khuḍayyir 2006: 89). The Istanbul educated Rassām (1882–1952) was the leader of the modern generation of Iraqi painters. We can infer that the fictional Maḥmūd dies sometime between the 1950s and the 1970s (the story was written and published in the late 1970s).

[14] Maḥmūd starts his career as a painter by drawing the ship that carries him and his fellow prisoners from Basra to Bombay, then goes on to draw portraits of his comrades and prison guards when he is in prison there, and even makes a self-portrait (Khuḍayyir 2006: 77).

The way in which Maḥmūd's imagination interacts with historical characters and events is at the heart of the story. He imagines that the Ottoman governors of Baghdad come to his studio on the Tigris and sit facing him so that he can paint their portraits: 'he painted them as if they were sitting in front of a camera' (78). These imaginary sittings turn into a 'symbolic opportunity' (*furṣa ramziyya*) for the sitters, who, as if believing that 'the pen point [would] capture in a brief moment the expression on their faces with grey neutrality, and forever [...]', present their faces to the painter with a fixed expression: 'suggestive features covered by a faint stubble; ascetic features covered with thick beards; the severity of Janissaries, girded with swords; Mameluke charm, expressed through languid glances; Ottoman might, represented by medals and scented by tobacco and opium' (ibid.). However, these sketches of the governors sitting for their portraits in Chinese ink gather layers of significance as the painter depicts their heads surrounded by fantastic details and accessories from a lavish daily life, in some cases in a carnivalesque mockery of the powerful.[15]

This preamble prepares us for the haunting night journey which dominates the first part of the story, when the discreet voice of the narrator invites us to accompany Maḥmūd as he follows Dāwud Pasha, the last Mameluke governor of Baghdad, on his final tour of the city in 1831. This was the year in which the city was ravaged by plague and floods, and besieged by the Ottoman army preparing to put an end to the autonomous reign of the Mameluke governor. The characters and setting of the governor's tour are reminiscent of those in a tale from the *Nights*: the governor, who is in disguise, meets muleteers, dervishes, beggars, chiefs of police, customs employees, and an anthropomorphised character that is presented as either Death or Plague. Here, crucially, the fantastic element is presented *explicitly* as the fruit of an artist's imagination and not as part of an astonishing reality as it is in the *Nights*, which produce 'a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure, mainly by grounding the supernatural in the natural' (Haddawy 1992: xxx). In contrast, the following is an example of Khuḍayyir's method. At the beginning of his last tour,

[15] For example, 'the dreadful Sultan Murad' is depicted sitting on a millstone over a well mouth in a Baghdad courtyard with a bowl of sheep's blood on his head, a target of soothsayers who are shown creeping out of the house to mock him (Khuḍayyir 2006: 78).

Dāwud, the Mameluke governor, himself infected with plague, recognises among the corpses he sees in the citadel market that of his *jubūqjī*[16] and the narrator wonders how the painter will depict Dāwud's expression: will the regret on his face be related more to the disruption in his tobacco supply, or to the man's death itself? (Khuḍayyir 2006: 80). Then, as the entourage proceeds on its journey, we read that the painter decides that the governor should be confronted by a dervish with a shaven head and a luxuriant beard, who enjoys piercing his body with needles and 'instead of blood, smoke gushes forth and rises up around his head and over the domes of the Mawla Khana, gathering between the two minarets like clouds' (81).

The narration is less a description of a hypothetical painting by Maḥmūd, or a storyteller's description of a fantastic event as a normal occurrence (coming with an implicit invitation that we should suspend our disbelief), than an attempt to depict Maḥmūd's imaginative construction of scenes. This is the narrative portrayal of a work in progress full of possibilities (what expression will he give the governor?); suggestions (it is an expression which can hardly be distinguished from his yearning for a smoke); telling choices (the painter places the governor's personal fishmonger and his terrified groom behind the governor and his horse, and in the background he paints part of the citadel with its towers empty of soldiers – all killed by the plague); and specific ideas about what the painter would like to include (he 'wants' to confront the governor with a dervish emitting smoke) – we are far from the matter of fact tone of the traditional storyteller.

In 'Ḥikāyat al-mawqid', the main narrator's 'boisterous' voice that urges us to respond to what we are reading is the most visible trait of the story's modernist nature, what distances it from a traditional form of storytelling. In 'Iḥtiḍār', this non-traditional element is provided by the unveiling of the creative process of an artist, be he Maḥmūd the painter or Khuḍayyir the writer. This particular metafictional feature is absent from folktales. The key character to appear to the governor and his men is the two-faced character of Death/Plague. How does it

[16] *Çubukçu* in Modern Turkish, denoting the man whose duty is to prepare the governor's tobacco.

appear to them? '[I]n the guise of a hunchback with a face like a rat's, carrying an axe' (ibid.). The ideal reader of the *Nights* (i.e. one whose disbelief is staunchly suspended) would immediately accept such embodiments of demons and jinn as real. Here, we are crucially told that 'Death appeared as Maḥmūd Effendi portrayed it': *ẓahara al-mawt kamā ṣawwarahu Maḥmūd afandī* (ibid.). The genesis of the depiction of Death as the hideous rat-faced hunchback is explained further at the end of the first part of the story when Dāwud, now back at the citadel after his nocturnal foray into the city, dictates to his loyal secretary, just before he dies: 'Indeed Plague is a black crow on top of the citadel tower, a hideous hunchbacked rat' (83).' This appears to be a direct quote from an actual text (although we have no concrete evidence of this) and may be an indication that Khuḍayyir found this image of Death in the memoirs of the Mameluke governor and decided to borrow it.

In the *Nights*, stories are narrated through a network of multiple striking parallels and astonishing coincidences. Here, there are many parallels between the first part of the story in which Maḥmūd the painter imagines Dāwud's last night journey through Baghdad, and its second part, in which Khuḍayyir narrates the death of the painter:[17] as the same rat-faced hunchback who claimed Dāwud's life comes back to haunt the mind of the painter, it is with a sense of aesthetic fulfilment that we reach the exhilarating conclusion that the painter has become a character in one of his paintings. The same symmetry we admire in the stories of the *Nights* is present here (never more evident than in the character of Death), but with significant differences. The fantastic element in the story (the visions of the dying painter and the enigmatic finale) is not there solely to entertain us but is also a reflection on the workings of human imagination and memory, and an attempt to depict what happens in the consciousness

[17] The correspondences between different parts of the story are numerous. In the first part, Dāwud Pasha takes the rifle of the chief of police and shoots at the dogs that the hunchback (Death) has at his service (Khuḍayyir 2006: 82); in the second part, Maḥmūd has visions of strange people coming to visit him (after his real friends have come to visit him when it is clear he has not long left to live): a woman singer who looks like a shop-window mannequin is accompanied by a man called Jisām who looks like one of the thugs (*ashqiyā'*) in the Ottoman city and she introduces him as a dog hunter. She then takes a rifle that Jisām has under his *abaya* and gives it to Maḥmūd (87) who will later use it to shoot at Death (88). The singer mannequin extracts from a box the head of a man with the same features as Maḥmūd (87): a warning in fine gothic style that his last moment is approaching.

of a dying person. In Khuḍayyir's own *'ajā'ib* storytelling, human creativity and imagination are at the forefront rather than destiny, the engine that moves the narrative in many tales in the *Nights*. If in the *Nights*, destiny or God's will are often highlighted as ordering forces in the universe, here we have a man-made world, and a secular take on the mystery of death: there is an evocative depiction of a man's dying moments which also effectively (and ironically) highlights the gap between the individual's inner life and what transpires externally to the people who are physically with the individual but have no access to his inner world.[18] In his comatose state, the painter sees Death. Death approaches from the river Tigris, on a *guffa*, the traditional Iraqi round-shaped riverboat. He climbs up the balcony railings: 'a mean creature appeared opposite him, rat-faced, his two beady eyes emitting buried resentment and deadly scorn' (88). The painter raises a rifle he was given by the singer who visited him in his dreams, and aims it at the evil creature. A 'hoarse' shot is released. In the world outside the mind of the painter, the noise is described as one made by a man at the moment of dying: the cry of a life pent-up in the painter's throat, which he has finally released in the face of the night, the river and the slumbering city. The end happens quickly, but in an extraordinary scene that represents concisely a story where the tangible is indistinguishable from visions and dreams, something falls into the river, rapid footsteps are heard climbing the stairs and the room fills with the smell of gunpowder (ibid.). The end is enigmatic. As we are clearly meant to consider this scene as a vision that occurs in the mind of Maḥmūd, why do we hear the noise of something dropping in the river? And how can we explain the smell of gunpowder in the room? The mystery is never resolved, even when the visions in the painter's mind are substituted by the seemingly tangible world of journalistic report, and in a few sentences, the story is abruptly brought to an end. After the painter is buried, a newspaper reports on his death and a photograph of the *guffa* tied to the railings of the balcony of the painter's house on the Tigris comes with the caption: 'The painter's last journey was in this *guffa*' (89).

[18] Unlike what happens in the *Nights* where the meaning of dreams is always readily available to readers and what is foretold in them is promptly realised (Irwin 1994: 193–195), the dream/nightmare sessions in 'Iḥtiḍār' are obscure as Maḥmūd is visited by strange characters who seem to be the ghosts of people he has met in his long life.

In his essay 'The Storyteller', Walter Benjamin highlights the difference between the information delivered by newspapers via their reporting and explanation of events, and the transfer of experience that storytelling (especially the oral transmission of folktales and fairy tales) fulfilled in a pre-modern society (Benjamin 1999: 88–89). In his view the latter form of communication accomplishes a more genuine transmission of knowledge and counsel by relying on a narration that comes without interpretation and therefore puts the hermeneutic onus firmly upon the reader or listener, and it is in this way that the story is shared and appropriated (he mentions the Russian nineteenth century writer Nikolai Leskov and Kafka as writers who can be considered the modern heirs of the oral storytellers of old). We see an ironic dramatization of the gap separating these two forms of knowledge transfer in the finale of 'Iḥtiḍār', where the headline ('Death of the Last Painter from ʿAbd al-Qādir Rassām's Generation', Khuḍayyir 2006: 89) and the caption accompanying the photograph not only fail to solve the mystery of what exactly happened when the painter died, but even add to the enigma: what are we to make of Maḥmūd's mysterious last journey in the *guffa*? Was it not the same *guffa* used by Death? In other words, the hermeneutic onus is on us, the readers.

On 10th June 1987, ten years after writing 'Iḥtiḍār', Khuḍayyir gave a lecture in Baghdad, which was later published under the title 'Dhākirat al-ʿaṭṭār' ('The Perfumer's Memory', included in the collection of essays *al-Ḥikāya al-jadīda*; 'The New Tale', 1995). In his lecture Khuḍayyir reflects on the fruitful relationship that modern fiction can have with traditional storytelling. He takes Gogol's 'The Overcoat' (1842) as an excellent example of a fictional story in which the normal course of events is hijacked by a fantastic element akin to that of folk tales, the appearance of poor Akakij Akakievič's ghost. Khuḍayyir's lecture is in part a defence of the more resolute and conscious turn towards the fantastic that his own fiction had taken since the early 1980s. The lecture ends with a call for a new sort of Arabic fiction:

> Others from amongst our contemporary writers, the likes of Borges, Marquez, Calvino and Buzzati, will grasp the genius of Gogol's storytelling inventiveness and rescue fantastic narratives from the banality of fairy tales and from the oddness of Gothic literature. They will lay down the bases for a new storytelling-like form of fiction [*al-qiṣṣa al-ḥikā'iyya*] which I shall call 'the new tale'. With these writers, the spirit of our era is fused with the power of a fantastic [*'ajā'ibī*] and magical creation. This makes us turn to the tales of our vast Orient, buried in eternal books like the *Thousand and One Nights*, in which fantasy is connected with an enjoyable, incandescent reality. (Khuḍayyir 1995a: 30)

Elsewhere, Khuḍayyir reflects on fiction within the extreme political circumstances of Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s (see for example Khuḍayyir 2014 and 2015). Here, we should highlight the significance of the writer's reference to authors like Borges, which is tellingly associated with a reconsideration of the *Nights*. Even before Khuḍayyir articulated in his lecture his concept of the nature of a new art of the short story, we have evidence in stories like 'Ḥikāyat' and 'Iḥtiḍār' of his fascination with the interrelatedness of the fantastic and the contingent reality, and his willingness to explore it, indeed to base his fiction on it. It is clear that once Khuḍayyir started reading writers like Borges (apparently only after the publication of his second short story collection in 1978, Khuḍayyir 2008: 117) he was inspired to go further into his explorations of the fantastic and was also encouraged to consider the *Nights* and the Arabic *turāth* as sources of inspiration for his own fiction of 'marvels' (*'ajā'ib*). We can refer this double discovery to what Adonis said about his own experience of discovering the modernity of some Arab poets of the past like Abū Nuwās, thanks to his reading of French poets like Baudelaire: 'I was one of those [Arab writers] who were captivated by Western culture. Some of us, however, went beyond that stage, armed with a changed awareness and new concepts which enabled us to reread our heritage with new eyes' (Adonis 1990: 80). This acknowledgement by Adonis is echoed in

Khuḍayyir's call for a rediscovery of 'the tales of our vast Orient' and the *Nights*. It is clear that both Borges and the *Nights* were a great inspiration in the new stories Khuḍayyir wrote after the publication of 'Iḥtiḍār'. In the text we will now analyse, Khuḍayyir writes an homage to the Argentinian writer in the form of a pastiche of a tale from the *Nights*: 'Rumūz al-liṣṣ' ('The Symbols of the Thief').

3. Borges and the Thief: the Symbols of the Marshes.

'Rumūz' is included in *Ḥadā'iq al-wujūh* ('The Gardens of the Faces', 2008), which is an excellent example of what the author calls *naṣṣ jāmiʿ*, 'an assembling text', intended to offer an alternative hybrid form to conventional novels. This is a text in which Khuḍayyir combines different literary genres, such as fiction, autobiography and an impressionistic sort of essay writing.[19]

The whole book is based on the allegory of the writer (an autobiographical authorial persona) as a gardener. This wider allegorical context is one of the main features that distinguish 'Rumūz' from 'Ḥikāyat' and 'Iḥtiḍār'. The second part of the book is divided into six sections that correspond to six gardens, which are clear symbols for six muses, six sources of inspiration in the gardener's literary life. A discussion of 'Rumūz', which is part of the section dedicated to Borges, will help demonstrate Khuḍayyir's evolving relationship with traditional storytelling.

As we have mentioned above, the tale 'Rumūz' reads in part like a Borges-inspired tale from the *Nights*, 'the infinite book' much admired by Borges. In this tale, the emphasis is less on

[19] We can see in *Baṣrayāthā: ṣurat madīna* (Damascus: Dār al-madā, 1993) the first such explicitly hybrid *naṣṣ jāmiʿ* by Khuḍayyir (the book has been translated into English as *Basrayatha: The Story of a City* by William M. Hutchins; London: Verso, 2008). Following this first text, we have *Kurrāsat Kānūn* (Amman: Dār azmina li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2001) and the more recent *Aḥlām Bāṣūrā* (Baghdad & Beirut: Manshūrāt al-jamal, 2016). Even though *Baṣrayāthā* and *Aḥlām Bāṣūrā* brought together short pieces which had been previously published independently in Iraqi journals and newspapers, they can be distinguished from Khuḍayyir's other more conventional short story collections. In fact, the short pieces collected in the *nuṣūṣ jāmiʿa* tend to be a mixture of fictional story and essay, and are also put into a specific context.

events and their meaning than on the way the tale takes shape through the interaction of the stories told by four different narrators: the gardener/narrator and the young teacher (both Khuḍayyir figures), the thief, and the fisherman. This collective narration of 'Rumūz' distinguishes it from 'Ḥikāyat' and 'Iḥtiḍār', as does the setting of the story. In 'Rumūz', the mysterious location provided by the Marshes with their canals, islands and bamboo thickets, is connected to adventures, ancient times and storytelling: the Marshes are 'a stable reflection in [...] the vanishing mirror of the old world' (Khuḍayyir 2008: 123).[20]

One dark and stormy night the legendary thief of the village in the Marshes where the young teacher works pays him a visit. The thief, now an old man, tells the young teacher what he saw on three successive days at sunset. This mysterious vision is at the heart of the story and is narrated several times with some variations. Its symbolism is both vivid and cryptic, in the manner of traditional folktales and of the *Nights*, and the pleasure of reproducing literary formulae that belong to traditional storytelling is one that Khuḍayyir embraces wholeheartedly here, hence the 'dark and stormy night' when the vision of the thief is first narrated. The old thief sees on the water surrounding the island where he lives an ibis (a bird called in Arabic 'the one with the scythe', *abū minjal*, because of its beak; or 'the black hermit', *al-nāsik al-aswad*). The bird glides on the water holding a serpent in its beak. When the bird raises its beak as if to greet the rays of the setting sun, the serpent wrapped around its beak looks like a golden anklet and drops of blood fall on to the water (126). Later, after the young teacher and the thief have become friends, the old man explains the significance of the vision and its symbols. Forty years before his meeting with the young teacher, the thief, then a young man 'strong of arm and pure of face', falls under the double spell of a mysterious woman: she stirs him with her beauty and provocative behaviour, but it is her magic golden anklets which bewitch him even more and he finds it impossible to resist the temptation to steal them: 'That was my first burglary and the

[20] Khuḍayyir evokes the atmosphere of mystery that pervades the Marshes by repeating key words like the adjective *mutawārⁱⁿ*, 'vanishing', 'hidden', which refers not only to the dimensions of this old world, but also to the shadowy figure of the legendary thief in the young teacher's imagination before he meets him, and to the women who live on the thief's island (Khuḍayyir 2008: 123, 124). It is probable that Khuḍayyir also has in mind the fact the Marshes – a prominent feature in some of his better known earlier stories – were drained under Saddam's orders following the 1991 Gulf War.

beginning of the stinging in my hands when they feel the urge to possess what doesn't belong to them' (131). Now, after all these years, the old thief receives a warning in the shape of his vision of the ibis and the serpent. He reads into this vision a warning not to return the anklets, but ignores it. Believing that returning the anklets will bring his long and illustrious career as a thief to a fitting end, he goes consciously towards his destiny: on his way to the woman, he is killed by a snake, which, according to the fisherman who discovers the thief's body, is then killed by an ibis.

Based on obscure symbolism that alludes to repentance, retribution and fate, the tale includes modernist elements and at the same time is part of the 'infinite time of the one thousand and one nights [that] continues its course' (Borges 1984: 56). We have echoes of all the magical phenomena, treasure hunts, adventurous quests and uncanny coincidences typical of the *Nights*. Like many of the protagonists of the *Nights*, the protagonist in 'Rumūz' is unable to escape his destiny even though he is aware of the powerfully symbolic coincidences that recur in his life.[21]

We can venture to say that as Khuḍayyir comes closer to appropriating the world and world view of the *Nights*, Fate becomes more visible than it ever was in 'Ḥikāyat' and 'Iḥtiḍār'. However, it is clear that 'Rumūz' remains more concerned with how stories are crafted and collected, and how symbols are received or explained.[22] Moreover, the story takes on a different perspective if we assume the thief to be a character in the teacher's head. In fact, the way the thief is introduced into the story suggests that he and his stories may be taken from books:

[21] As in Dino Buzzati's short story 'Il colombre' (1966), which Khuḍayyir quotes in his story 'Dāmā, Dāmū, Dāmī' (Khuḍayyir 1995b: 64), the protagonist at the end of his life decides to face his fate and go towards his death. In Buzzati's story, the protagonist discovers that the sea monster he spent all his life trying to escape did not want to devour him but only wanted to give him the famous *Perla del Mare* (the Sea Pearl) 'which brings its owner luck, power, love and peace of mind' (Buzzati 2013: 8). The remains of both the thief in 'Rumūz' and the hero in 'Il colombre' are found in their boats by fishermen.

[22] This story includes a section in which Khuḍayyir sustains his allegorical depiction of the Marshes and the legendary life of the thief by using Quranic terminology. For example, the day and the night have their own symbol or *āya* ('sign', 'miracle', 'marvel'; and also the word used for a Quranic 'verse'). However, rather than giving the story a religious element, the Islamic terms contribute to the story's symbolic dimension (Khuḍayyir 2008: 123).

> [the teacher] goes back to his hut [...] and waits for occasional visits and imaginary journeys that he chooses from the bookshelves in his hut, until, one dark and stormy night a boat dropped anchor next to the teacher's boat [...] and the great thief strolled into the hut. (Khuḍayyir 2008: 124)

One of Borges's stories mentioned by Khuḍayyir in his introduction to 'Rumūz' is 'The Circular Ruins' (1940), which is relevant here as its main character is ultimately revealed to have been created in the dream of another character, and features of the settings of each story are strikingly similar. Intriguingly, we can also see in 'Rumūz' Khuḍayyir's playful attempt to fill the gap left by *Ḥiyal al-luṣūṣ*, al-Jāḥiẓ's lost book on thieves. Khuḍayyir seems to hint at this possibility when the young bookish teacher mentions this lost book to the old thief (Khuḍayyir 2008: 126).[23]

The framework within which the tale is told, and which is made to fit into Khuḍayyir's allegorical palimpsest, is provided directly by the first person narrator/gardener, who acknowledges that the tale is being retold in the gardens and re-worked by the gardeners, the seasoned story-tellers (133), an explicit discussion on the genesis of what we are reading that is typical of metafictional discourse.[24] After the body of the thief is discovered by the fisherman and brought back to the village, we are taken back to the last night on which the thief visited the teacher: at the end of his story of how he stole the woman's golden anklets, helped by their

[23] As Philip Kennedy notes in his article 'Borges and the Missing Pages of the *Nights*', Borges uses a similar narrative technique in his story 'The South' (1953): what seems to happen here is that the protagonist has a dream while he is in hospital, in which he is the hero of an adventure inspired by the *Nights* (Kennedy 2013). We might conclude that the protagonist of the Borges story actually dies in hospital at the moment when he dies in his dream in a knife duel on the Pampas. This is similar to what happens to Maḥmūd Effendī in Khuḍayyir's 'Iḥtiḍār' where his dreamed killing of Death coincides with his 'real' death on his veranda overlooking the Tigris. In 'The South' and 'Rumūz', Borges and Khuḍayyir are also ironically asking whether art and books are superior to the physically experienced life of action and adventure. There is no evidence Khuḍayyir has ever read 'The South', which makes the parallels between his work and Borges's all the more telling.

[24] In 'al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalātha' ('The Three Wise Men', 1986) and 'Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf' ('Yūsuf's Tales', 1987), two stories included in his collection *Ruʾyā kharīf* ('An Autumn Vision', 1995), Khuḍayyir uses the frame story device and the former ends with a metafictional aside to the reader on how the story itself was supposedly written.

magic powers, the old thief told the teacher: 'My friend, you now possess the interpretation of the three symbols and you don't need to guess what lies behind them' (132). However, the three symbols of the story (the bird, the snake and the anklet) belong not only to 'the time of the Marshes' but also to what the gardener-narrator of the story can *imagine* about that mysterious place (123). In fact, at the end of the tale, after having heard the thief's final words to the teacher, the narrator says:

> But what remains of the journey is restricted to conjecture that relies on the intuition of a teacher who stole from the thief the ability to open locks, to draw aside the veils from the kingdoms of darkness, water and golden serpents. The final part of the tale contains the inventiveness of a storyteller who has been given a charm that the magic of words cannot render worthless in a fraudulent art. (132)

The gardener had initially promised us that the story of the thief would show us how stealing is connected to love, but here we can say that stealing is felicitously associated with storytelling (126) and so the teacher proceeds to give us his own imagined finale in which the thief is killed by the kiss of a snake-woman. The young narrator here dramatises how a woman's wiles can prevail, a recurring trope in the *Nights*.

In his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Benjamin reflects on the figure of the storyteller in relation to Proust's work. He defines the story as one of the oldest forms of communication and adds:

> It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se* [...]; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It

> thus bears the marks of the storyteller as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand. (Benjamin 1999: 156)[25]

Conclusion

In this article we have shown how Khuḍayyir has moved from a seemingly sceptical take on traditional storytelling to an enthusiastic re-working of it within his own ironic enactment of the way tales are transmitted in both oral and written forms. In 'Ḥikāyat', the modernist narrator's clash with a Shahrazad-like narrator, whether merely staged or genuinely heartfelt, is certainly at the core of a story that is an original and sophisticated example of social criticism. In 'Iḥtiḍār', the focus switches to the imaginative powers of an artist whose multifarious identities include the fictive painter Maḥmūd, the narrator of the story, and Khuḍayyir. The sensibility of this composite artist (inspired by the 1831 memoirs of the last Mameluke governor of Baghdad) enthusiastically embraces the fantastic: Khuḍayyir is moving towards his own contemporary literature of *'ajā'ib*. Finally, in 'Rumūz', the modernist narrator does not look down on the putative *Nights* tale; on the contrary, he enthusiastically appropriates it and embeds it within his Borgesian self-reflexive game. In an ambiguous narrative full of symbols and open to different interpretations (including one that sees the pseudo-*Nights* story as wholly imagined by a character, as happens in 'Iḥtiḍār'), the narrator is seen as a crafter of stories, a finder and a transmitter (or even a thief) of stories, who uses his imagination to add to the story he finds, but remains part of an anonymous network of storytellers (the gardeners). While the thief and the teacher discuss the possible interpretations of the symbols, and whether they should be interpreted at all, the gardeners suppress their interpretation in order to preserve the suspense for the reader (128). Even as we continue to follow the story to see what happens next, our enjoyment or entertainment will not derive from questions being answered or problems solved. They rather derive from us, as readers, becoming part of the action, by, to paraphrase Borges,

[25] Benjamin uses the same image in the previously cited essay 'The Storyteller' (1936); see Benjamin 1999: 91.

enriching it, misunderstanding it, changing it into something else (Borges quoted in Irwin 1994: 284). Here, we can clearly see how Khuḍayyir appropriates and reformulates Borges's ironic questioning of the concepts of authorship, literary precursors and plagiarism. In 'Rumūz', storytelling is a collective endeavour in which not only 'gardeners' like Borges and Khuḍayyir, skilled masters of the trade, participate, but also a fisherman, an old thief and a young, bookish teacher, and in which we, the readers, are also implicitly invited to take part.[26] The narrator in 'Rumūz' talks enigmatically of the possibility of 'the magic of words' being used 'in a fraudulent art' (Khuḍayyir 2008: 132). Perhaps here he implies a challenge to stories that enchant by their comforting formulae and the musical familiarity of their images. In this way he reiterates what Khuḍayyir said on 10th June 1987 in his Baghdad lecture, about great writers like Borges saving fantastic storytelling from 'the banality of fairy tales and from the oddness of Gothic literature' (Khuḍayyir 1995a: 30). Although in 'Rumūz' there is no evident socio-political content, insofar as it is an exploration of storytelling, and more specifically of the use of *symbols* in stories (see the title of the story), the relationship of symbols to ambiguity, conveying meaning in indirect ways and challenging readers to interpret them, goes beyond entertainment, and can be construed as deeply political.

Unlike other modern Arab writers who have used the *Nights* mainly as a ploy by which to convey their views on the socio-political problems of their countries (Maḥfūẓ, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr, Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī), Khuḍayyir refers to the *Nights* in order to, on one hand, give fictional expression to his understanding of how to write and how to read and, on the other hand, to make his own one of the most evident and felicitous

[26] Irwin underlines how Borges was inspired by the frame device in the *Nights*, not only because it promises 'the possibility of an infinitely prolonged descent through tales within tales', but also because it suggests 'the possibility that the reader, as he reads a story framed within another story, may become himself uneasily aware that he too may be framed, that is, part of a story that someone else is telling' (Irwin 1994: 284). Khuḍayyir answers a question on Borges's influence by denying any anxiety of influence and by adding ironically: 'In Borges's words, the story composed by a specific author might be a dream in the mind of another author.' (Khuḍayyir 2005a: 101).

purposes of folktales: to entertain.[27] In Khuḍayyir, we find the same 'intimacy and complicitous familiarity with the *Nights* that we find in Proust or Borges', a familiarity that Abdelfattah Kilito fails to find in the works of other Arab writers who have drawn on the *Nights* for inspiration (Kilito 2014: 124; cf. Ghazoul 1996: 135).

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[27] In re-writing some of the tales of the *Nights* in her own modern prose, Ḥanān al-Shaykh chooses another more direct way to relate to the famous collection (see *Ṣāḥibat al-dār Shahrazād*, 2012; *One Thousand and One Nights*, 2011).

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